TL 6055

UNHCR UP DATE

R 15 OCT. 1999

14 October 1999

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Public Information Section

UNHCR, INDONESIA AGREE ON ACCESS TO CAMPS, RETURN OF EAST TIMORESE

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) today (Thursday) said Indonesia formally agreed to give it free and unimpeded access to refugees across West Timor which hosts some 230,000 East Timorese accommodated in squalid makeshift camps.

The agreement signed in Jakarta Thursday by Indonesia's Welfare Minister, H. Haryono Suyono, and UNHCR's Representative, Rene van Rooyen, gives the UN refugee organisation a free hand in organising the repatriation of East Timorese refugees who wish to return to East Timor from West Timor and elsewhere in Indonesia.

It says all East Timorese will be allowed to make a decision "free from any form of intimidation or threat" on whether they want to return or remain. UNHCR will be able to establish an operational presence in all places housing East Timorese to ensure that the agreement is honoured on the ground.

The written agreement follows similar verbal assurances given to High Commissioner Sadako Ogata by Indonesia's President B.J. Habibie during Ogata's visit to Indonesia last month.

Since last Friday, UNHCR has flown more than 1,500 East Timorese from West Timor back to East Timor. The airlift's capacity doubled on Wednesday when the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) joined the airlift effort with two more aircraft.

On Thursday, IOM assisted UNHCR to further expand the airbridge to East Timor. 278 East Timorese were flown from Jakarta back to East Timor as part of an effort to return thousands of East Timorese displaced in other regions of Indonesia. The return is due to increase substantially as more air and sea transport becomes available in the coming days.

The opening of a land corridor between West and East Timor is imminent. UNHCR plans to test the land route shortly. By next week, UNHCR hopes to return up to 2 000 people daily.

HCR/00
P.O. Box 2500
1211 Geneva 2

Tel.:
(41 22) 739 85 02

Fax:
(41 22) 735 73 15